

CIA job: morale restored but reforms left for Turner

By John Dillin

Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

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George Bush was shocked and apprehensive. President Gerald Ford had just asked him to quit his post as ambassador to China and take over the troubled Central Intelligence Agency. It was 1975.

The agency was a "dead end" job, Mr. Bush thought - and it would be the finish of his political career. He wondered whether his political opponents planned to "bury Bush at the CIA." He thought about a comment Henry Kissinger once made: "Even paranoids have real enemies."

Today, Bush brags about his CIA experience. It has become one of the crown jewels in his sparkling résumé - a job that he says gave him special insight and helped equip him for the White House.

Bush claims he was responsible for "picking up the CIA when it was down." In an interview with the Monitor, he claimed credit for making needed changes and putting the intelligence community back on its feet.

Is Bush claiming too much? Or did he really do the first-class job that he talks about in campaign speeches all across the country?

The Bush tenure at the CIA's Langley, Va., headquarters lasted only about a year. But it was a year of deep problems at the agency, its morale shattered by the revelations of a Senate investigating committee headed by Frank Church (D) of Idaho. If one asks people in the American intelligence community about Bush, there is much praise for his time at Langley.

William Colby, who was CIA director until Bush took over, says: "The first thing to remember is that Bush did a good job." Mr. Colby says Bush was so fondly remembered that in 1980, if the presidential election had been held only at CIA headquarters, Bush "would have gotten 99 percent of the votes."

Richard Helms, another former CIA director, jokes that intelligence operatives thought Bush "walked on water."

Loch Johnson, a political science professor at the University of Georgia, worked with Senator Church on the lengthy investigation of the CIA during the mid-1970s. He watched Bush's performance at Langley, and rates it favorably.

"Bush's general description of what he accomplished there is right. He was a tonic for the agency when it was feeling pretty poorly," Dr. Johnson says. The professor, currently writing "America's Secret Power," a book about the CIA, sought out senior intelligence officials for their opinions about former directors of the agency.

Johnson says the intelligence community puts three previous CIA directors at the very top - Allen Dulles, Richard Helms, and John McCone. But close behind, and far ahead of some others, is Bush.

A number of sources agree that Bush demonstrated two great strengths while he was at the agency. Personally, he was warm, gracious, and sincere. He showed a genuine interest in finding out what was going on. At a time when the CIA was at its nadir, being battered almost daily in the media, he treated

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the people of the agency with respect. Morale quickly climbed.

Bush also improved the agency's relations with official Washington. His hail-fellow-well-met attitude toward congressmen, his warmth, and his understanding of official Washington mended fences.

Archie Roosevelt, grandson of President Theodore Roosevelt and a longtime intelligence officer, calls Bush "a very human

man who knows how to talk to people. He also brought to the job a broad education" - immensely important at Langley.

Mr. Roosevelt, author of the just-released book, "For Lust of Knowing: Memoirs of an Intelligence Officer," says the agency was a "wreck" when Bush arrived. "Bush came along and with his personality and his contacts, and did a great deal to restore the morale there."

While most comments about Bush are positive, a number of sources caution that his CIA performance should not be exaggerated.

There is general agreement that it takes about two years to master the job of director of central intelligence and to begin having major input into a vast bureaucracy which extends around the world.

Bush stepped down after one year when Jimmy Carter, a Democrat, was elected to the White House. So his role at CIA, while important, was somewhat "superficial," Johnson says. There simply wasn't time to get dug in.

Johnson also adds this footnote: "I get a little nervous about Bush in the White House because I feel there might be an air of permissiveness pervading the intelligence establishment, and not the controls that President Carter imposed."

Johnson's concerns reach back to the dark days of dirty tricks, assassination plots, and deals with the Mafia which originally got the CIA into trouble with Congress.

More than 10 years later, former director Helms still blasts the Senate hearings that revealed CIA methods as "irresponsible." And Johnson, who took part in those hearings, says now that some charges against the agency may have been "exaggerated" and that "most of what the agency did was laudable." But he says there were some "repugnant" aspects of

the agency's work, and he worries that Bush might not keep such tendencies in check.

Robert Morgan, a former US senator and now director of the State Bureau of Investigation in North Carolina, took part in the CIA hearings. He cautions that it was only after Bush left and Adm. Stansfield Turner was put in charge at Langley that some improper clandestine activities were halted.

One of Bush's final acts as director was to brief President-elect Carter, in November 1976.

In his autobiography, "Looking Forward," Bush recalls that as he and his aides were explaining a problem expected to reach crisis levels by the mid-1980s, Carter held up his hand to stop. He said with a smile:

"I don't need to worry about that. By then George will be president."

The CIA obviously wasn't the political dead-end Bush expected.

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